
**GANG SUB-CULTURE: AN EXPLORATION OF
YOUTH GANGS IN THE FREE STATE PROVINCE****Ashwill Ramon Phillips¹ and Leanné Maritz²**

ABSTRACT

The concept of gangs has existed since the dawn of early Roman society (circa 753BC), where youths formed unique social groups in conflict with generally accepted societal norms. The concept 'youth gang' however, only originated in Europe during the 14th and 15th centuries with the phenomenon of vagabonds. Throughout the ages, history shows that whenever societies are undergoing large scale socio-political and economic turmoil, there is usually an upsurge in the number of displaced youth seeking alternative means of survival, especially in a surrogate group context. Despite this vulnerability, there is a dearth of research pertaining to the crime and victimisation patterns associated with gang formation within the Free State region of the Republic of South Africa. Gang-related activities in the province are rife, and gangs such as the Dickies, Dogs of War (DOW), Triple 6 (666), Born to Kill (BTK), International Junior Portuguese (IJP) and Natural Born Killers (NBK) are running rampant. These groups tend to conform to the commonly held beliefs of street gangs found in the literature, however in certain circumstances also include elements of the occult and African witchcraft. Since little is known about this new type of gang formation, this study provides an explorative account of these groups, primarily informed by a documentary analysis of the South African Police Service.

Keywords: *Criminal gang, gang membership, youth gang, risk factor, criminogenic risk factor, occult, African witchcraft.*

INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of crime has been explored significantly as it continues to plague all sectors of society, particularly developing countries such as South Africa. For quite some time the general assumption has been that crime is most often committed by mature individuals who are able to weigh the advantages of crime against the disadvantages of punishment which follow upon the commission of crime, a principle that is illustrated by Derek Cornish and Ronald Clarke's 'Rational Choice' perspective (Clarke & Felson, 1993:335). However, law violations are frequently committed by individuals under the age of majority. This is particularly disconcerting to South Africans, seeing as close to one third of the population is younger than 15 years of age and one in every three South African youths perpetrate serious offences including rape, murder and armed robbery (Booyens, Beukman & Bezuidenhout in Bezuidenhout & Joubert, 2008:27; Booyens, Beukman & Bezuidenhout in Bezuidenhout, 2013:32).

Owing to the fact that a large number of youth offences are committed within a group context, statistics such as these make it imperative to gain an understanding of the aetiology of youth offending, with particular reference to youth gang sub-culture. Within this context, a gang member is described as any individual who admits to criminal gang membership and resides in or frequents a particular criminal gang. The individual adopts the characteristics of the gang, such as their style of dress and tattoos, use of hand signs and distinctive dialect. The individual associates with known members of a criminal gang and has been arrested more than once in the company of these gang members for offences which are consistent with usual criminal gang activities (Prevention of Organized Crime Act, 1998 Section 1 (1) (Act 121 of 1998)).

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Even though the concept of gangs were already a prominent feature of the early Roman society, where youths formed distinguished social groups, the label of 'youth gangs' originated in Europe around the 14th and 15th centuries. Phenomena such as the industrial revolution, which led to rapid urbanisation and also an increase in the number of youths joining gangs as a means of adapting to the social changes which took place, exacerbated the gang problem (Sheldon, Tracy and Brown, 2012). Since becoming a democratic state, South Africa has in the past 21 years, also experienced dramatic social change, which has led to a myriad of pressing social issues. Some of the most serious issues faced by South Africans, were that of social and economic inequality, the ostracism of coloured communities and issues relating to service delivery, which led to an increase in the number of youths becoming involved in gang-related criminal activities (Petrus, 2013:74).

As significant as the gang phenomenon is, the shortage of research within the South African context is alarming. Considerable research on the phenomenon of gangs have been done in the Western Cape (Petrus, 2013:72) and some studies have been conducted in the Eastern Cape. However, there exists a dearth of research on gangs in the Free State region, where gang-related activities have become especially prevalent and widespread, with gangs such as the Dickies, Dogs of War (DOW), Triple 6 (666), Born to Kill (BTK), International Junior Portuguese (IJP) and Natural Born Killers (NBK) running rampant in the province (SAPS, 2014). Although youth gangs and adult criminal organisations have certain similarities and origins, it is crucial to note that the respective groupings have different modus operandi and serve unique purposes for their members (Howell & Bilchik, 1998). Youth gang sub-cultures usually have strict discipline and specific ranks and hierarchy that each come with its own assigned duties and responsibilities. Ranks may be mimicked by youths so as to link up with adult gangs, particularly the prison gang hierarchy (Liza Rossouw, 2011, personal communication, 20 September).

It is also essential that a distinction is made between criminal youth gangs and youths who simply form groupings and do not necessarily take part in criminal activities. Therefore, distinctive characteristics for gang membership include that there must be more than 2 members who fall within a specific age range, generally acknowledged as between the ages of 12 and 24. However, cases have been reported of children as young as eight years old being involved in gang activity (Liza Rossouw, 2011, personal communication, 20 September). Members also share some sense of identity, which might be specific symbols, signs, tattoos or clothing. For an individual to be seen as a gang member, some form of permanence within the gang is also required. Individuals are usually seen as gang members if they show loyalty over time, generally being part of the group for at least one year. Also, involvement in criminal activity is a central element that distinguishes normal groupings of youths from youth gangs (Esbensen, 2000).

Youths who willingly join gangs do so for a variety of reasons. These reasons may include protection from other gangs or criminal elements within their communities, craving power, respect and status, alcohol and substance use, the belief that gang membership will lead to the acquisition of financial and material assets, as well as the excitement which youths might associate with being part of a gang (Peacock, 2006:49,62). In numerous cases the decision to join a gang is informed and done willingly, especially in circumstances where gang membership is intergenerational. In other cases, adolescents may make a misguided and uninformed decision and join a gang in order to obtain the personal advantages mentioned above. Youths might also join gangs in order to find a place of belonging and camaraderie, or a sense of self-worth or they might see gang membership as a solution to various social adjustment issues that youths face during adolescence (Pacheco, 2012:20-21).

Youth gangs which are active in the Free State province, conform to the commonly held notions of street gangs, but in certain instances also include elements of the occult and

African witchcraft. In this context, the term ‘occult’ refers to a structure or process that is seen as clandestine, hidden, or secret, and pertains to practices of magic, alchemy, extra-sensory perception, astrology, spiritualism, and divination (“occult”, nd). In addition the term ‘African witchcraft’ refers to a collection of rituals, spells, cultures and beliefs found in some South African sub-cultures (Petrus, 2012:29). These practices include sinister aspects of witchcraft that have spilled over from countries such as Tanzania, Cameroon, Nigeria and Lesotho and describe activities taken part in by individuals who are seen as having a mystical ability to manipulate the forces of life and nature. These activities are committed with the intention to impact, whether positively or negatively, on the lives of other individuals or their property. It can also be described as the employment of mystical powers to affect others or their possessions. Examples include the infliction of persistent illness or bad luck on another (van Wyk, 2004:1210).

Taking into account the lack of knowledge pertaining to youth gang formations in the Free State province, together with the added elements of witchcraft and the occult, this article serves as a preliminary review on the composition of these gangs, with relation to their characteristics, modus operandi, recruitment, rituals and criminal involvement. This article therefore provides the basis for an envisioned follow-up study in the near future.

RISK FACTORS PERTAINING TO YOUTH GANG INVOLVEMENT

Risk factors can be defined as characteristics unique to an individual or their social environment which increases the probability of behavioural misconduct and are regarded as characteristics or hazards that make an individual more susceptible to displaying deviant or anti-social behaviour (Andrews, Bonta & Hoge, 1990:49; Walsh & Ellis, 2007:233; De Souza Da Silveira, Maruschi & Bazon, 2012:348; Maree in Bezuidenhout & Joubert, 2008:56; Maree in Bezuidenhout, 2013:69). Risk factors however, are most commonly associated with deviance rather than criminal behaviour, where deviance entails behaviour which is deemed as socially unacceptable but within the bounds of what is legally permitted and criminal behaviour entails any behaviour which is regarded as illegal or which is prohibited by the state. Risk factors are therefore not essentially regarded as a cause of deviance, but rather factors which increase the likelihood that an individual will engage in socially unacceptable (deviant) behaviour.

Criminogenic risk factors refer to risk factors which are explicitly linked to unlawfulness and which enhances the likelihood of criminal and violent misbehaviour (Maree in Bezuidenhout & Joubert, 2008:56; Maree in Bezuidenhout, 2013:69). These can be categorised into individual and social risk factors, each type being further sub-divided. Social risk factors are wide ranging (i.e. macro- or broad level risk factors) and include risk factors within the family context, the external environment or community, the school and peer-group associations (Maree in Bezuidenhout & Joubert, 2008:57-72; Maree in Bezuidenhout, 2013:70-85). Individual risk factors pertain only to a specific person (micro- or narrow level risk factors) and refer to factors such as biographical features (i.e. age, gender, ethnicity), biosocial – (diet, brain function, genetic make-up) and psycho-social characteristics (i.e. intelligence, personality traits) (Maree in Bezuidenhout & Joubert, 2008:72-76; Maree in Bezuidenhout, 2013:85-90).

The table below is a classification of the most common social and individual criminogenic risk factors, organised in terms of the age of onset and domain in which they occur (Shader, 2001:4; Maree in Bezuidenhout, 2013:70-90):

Table 1: Classification of criminogenic risk factors based on Maree and Schader's categorisation

		Risk Factor	
Domain		Early Onset (ages 6-11)	Late Onset (ages 12-14)
Individual		General unlawfulness Substance abuse Being Male Aggression Hyperactivity Anti-social behaviour Exposure to violence Health problems Physical problems Low IQ Anti-social attitudes Deceitfulness	General unlawfulness Restlessness Trouble concentrating Risk taking Aggression Being male Physical violence Anti-social attitudes Crimes against persons Anti-social behaviour Low IQ Substance abuse
Social	Family	Poverty Anti-social parents Poor parent-child relationships Harsh, lax, or inconsistent discipline Broken homes Separation from parents Other conditions Abusive parents Neglect	Poor parent-child relationships Harsh or lax discipline Poor monitoring, supervision Low parental involvement Anti-social parents Broken home Low socio-economic status/poverty Abusive parents Family conflict
	School	Poor attitude, performance	Poor attitude, performance Academic failure
	Peer group	Weak social ties Anti-social peers	Weak social ties Anti-social, delinquent peers Gang membership
	Community		Neighbourhood crime, drugs Neighbourhood disorganisation

(Adapted from Shader, 2001:4; Maree in Bezuidenhout, 2013:70-90).

For the purpose of this article, only certain criminogenic risk factors pertaining to youth gang involvement will be discussed, as a discussion on the wide-ranging list of risk factors pertaining to youth gang involvement would warrant a complete discussion in a separate article. The risk factors discussed below were specifically chosen as the authors perceive them to commonly occur, not only in the Free State, but in South Africa as a whole. The authors also by no means imply that the risk factors discussed below is an exhaustive list influencing the behaviour of youth gang members in the Free State, if at all influential. Specific factors contributing to gang membership in the Free State and the extent to which these factors influence the law violating behaviour of these youths will be examined in the aforementioned follow-up study.

Unemployment and poverty

Statistics obtained in the first quarter of 2012, indicated that approximately 25,2% of South Africans were unemployed, with an estimate of 4,5 million unemployed persons (Bezuidenhout, 2013:71). This exorbitant unemployment rate could be a possible explanation for South Africa's high crime rates, as unemployment is regarded as one of the main predictors of crime and delinquency according to Philips and Land (in Van Steden, Boutellier, Scholte & Heijnen, 2012:56) & Gaik, Abdullah, Elias & Uli (2010:385). Arthur (2007:25), supports this by affirming that both official crime statistics and longitudinal studies show that children from impoverished families are more at risk of committing crime in comparison to those from the middle class. However, it is important to bear in mind that it is not unemployment or poverty in itself that is seen as a risk factor, but rather the consequences of being unemployed or impoverished (Maree in Bezuidenhout & Joubert, 2008:63; Maree in Bezuidenhout, 2013:76; Arthur, 2007:25; Ward in Burton, 2007:21; Gaik, Abdullah, Elias & Uli, 2010:385).

Households in which parents are unemployed are normally characterised by stress, frustration, aggression and violence. This has a negative effect on the parent-child relationship, as parents may spend so much time looking for employment or may become so frustrated with their situation, that they start to neglect or abuse their children. This in turn may break down the level of attachment between parent and child, or may cause the child to become desensitised to violence and aggression. These occurrences can be motivated by Travis Hirschi's social control theory and Albert Bandura's social learning theory respectively.

According to Hirschi (in Williams and McShane, 2014:168; Bartollas and Schmallegger, 2013:62), behaviour is regulated by a 'social bond' consisting of four inter-dependent elements namely attachment, involvement, commitment and belief. Attachment refers to the bond an individual has with important others such as parents, teachers or community members. Norm violations are then seen as being inconsistent to the wishes and beliefs of these important others (Van der Westhuizen in Bezuidenhout, 2011:157). Hirschi (in Williams and McShane, 2014:168; Bartollas and Schmallegger, 2013:63) states that if a child has a strong relationship with parents, it will reinforce conformity resulting in law abiding behaviour. Therefore it can be assumed that if the level of attachment between parent and child is compromised by the level of stress experienced by the parent, it would have a negative effect on the child's behaviour and would thus increase the risk of criminality.

Parental and sibling criminality

Parent and sibling criminality is another factor which significantly increases the risk that young people will get involved in criminal behaviour, as anti-social adults are more likely to have children who present or struggle with conduct problems (Ward in Burton, 2007:20; Maree in Bezuidenhout, 2013:77). Maree (in Bezuidenhout & Joubert, 2008:64; in Bezuidenhout, 2013:77) states that children who are raised in households where family members are involved in crime are at high risk of also becoming involved in crime because it will be seen as common behaviour, which normalises the criminal behaviour portrayed by other family members. Maguin, Hawkins, Catalano, Hill, Abbott and Herrenkohl (1995) support this by stating that children under 10 years of age, who have parents that are tolerant of violence, are more likely to themselves resort to violent behaviour by the age of 18 years as they would view violence as 'normal' or 'acceptable' when used in specific situations or under specific circumstances. In addition, violent or aggressive behaviour displayed by siblings can have a similar effect, depending on the interaction and closeness of siblings, the influence of one sibling on another can be great enough to encourage the other to join in their delinquent behaviour.

Incomplete families

Single parents are often overwhelmed in the sense that they have numerous work responsibilities, experience a loss of financial security and lose time and interest in caring for their children (Routt & Anderson, 2011:12). Without a parent present (particularly a father) there is no role model from whom to learn appropriate behaviour, there is a lack of parental love and care leading to behavioural problems from an early age and children may run away from home to seek affection elsewhere or join delinquent sub-cultures to gain status or a sense of belonging. This is motivated in a study done by Sheldon and Eleanor Gleuck (in Arthur, 2007:17), in which they compared the backgrounds of 1000 youths of which 500 were delinquent and 500 were non-delinquent. Approximately 60% of the delinquent group were raised in incomplete families compared to only 33% of the non-delinquent group. Similar results were found by West (in Arthur, 2007:17) and Farrington (in Hawkins, Herrenkohl, Farrington, Brewer, Catalano, Harachi & Cothorn, 2000:4), who state that parent-child separation before the age of 10 years has been found to predict future offending, whilst being raised in a single parent family before the age of 13 years, predicted convictions for violent crime by the age of 18 years (Henry and colleagues in Hawkins, Herrenkohl, Farrington, Brewer, Catalano, Harachi and Cothorn, 2000:4).

Availability of alcohol and drugs

There is little doubt that substances such as drugs and alcohol are frequently used by a large number of youth, both locally and internationally. Siegel (2002:238), supports this claim by stating that 19% of detained Australian youths have reported using heroin at least once, roughly one half of British Columbian youths admit to using drugs, South Africa faces increased usage rates for teenage cocaine and heroin abuse and Thailand experiences serious problems with regard to heroin and methamphetamine. Self-report surveys also point out that 90% of high school pupils use alcohol and that more than half have used some type of drug (Siegel, 2002:238). Uniform Crime Reports (compiled by the FBI) in 2005 also indicated that more than 141000 youths were arrested on state and local drug charges nationwide, while the Arrestee Drug Abuse Monitoring (ADAM) programme found that approximately 60% of males and 46% of females tested positive for drug use at arrest (Williams and McShane in Benekos & Merlo, 2009:85). In addition to this, government studies of Grade 12 learners also indicated that close to 50% have experimented with a prohibited drug, 27% have used drugs other than marijuana, and 20% had done so in the year the survey was conducted (Williams and McShane in Benekos & Merlo, 2009:85).

With regard to South Africa, the University of South Africa (UNISA) conducted a survey in 2000 on 2281 Grade 7, 10 and 11 learners (Booyens, Beukman & Bezuidenhout in Bezuidenhout, 2013:53). This survey indicated that approximately 25% of the respondents had inhaled glue, petrol or paint thinner, 27% had used mandrax, ecstasy, LSD or other hard-core drugs, and 22% had smoked crack, cocaine or mandrax ('white pipe'). On average, 33% of respondents indicated that they could obtain marijuana within an hour, while about 25% could obtain LSD, ecstasy, cocaine or heroin within a day, and 33% (of which 24% were under the age of 12 years) admitted to using marijuana. In another study conducted by Matthews in 2004, it was discovered that the use of marijuana and mandrax was most prevalent among 15-16 year olds and that most young people start off with 'soft' drugs such as alcohol or marijuana which then becomes a gateway for the use of 'hard' drugs such as cocaine or heroin (Booyens, Beukman & Bezuidenhout in Bezuidenhout, 2013:53).

Criminally oriented attitudes and beliefs, and criminal involvement

Young people residing in areas where community members have criminally oriented attitudes and beliefs, or areas where residents see crime as an acceptable way of reaching one's goals, may be at higher risk of engaging in unlawful behaviour as they may perceive crime to be a normal or typical phenomenon. They will also frequently be exposed to negative role models in their communities, which will result in criminal behaviour being seen more often and being learnt more easily as they may come to realise that crime or violence is feasible in particular situations, is a quicker and more effortless way to reach goals and is seen as acceptable behaviour that many community members themselves engage in and see no wrong in committing crime. According to Maree (in Bezuidenhout, 2013:74), many South Africans irrespective of their culture, also see crime as acceptable "as long as one does not get caught". Maree (in Bezuidenhout, 2013:74) further states that individuals living in communities where crime is 'accepted' and 'endured', will not encounter the same level of social control as an individual living in a community that regards crime as inappropriate and unacceptable.

This is especially true with regard to the South African youth, who in many instances are negatively socialised and excluded. The knowledge that families and schools are essential for proper socialisation and the healthy development of children as they mature (especially through adolescence) has been compromised by the youth revolt of 1976 and the continuous rebellion through the 1980's and has not yet been adequately addressed. This left the youth with a sense of being lost, and they are continuing to learn how to be lost, due to a misconception of crime in South Africa, poor strategy options, and crime prevention policies following 1994 (Pelser, 2008). These youths mature in an environment of extreme violence, and hence develop a strong sense of self-preservation and survival instincts, and therefore acts such as vandalism, stealing and violence have become internalised and is part of their everyday lives (Maree in Bezuidenhout, 2013:75).

The availability of firearms

South Africa is and has long been plagued with firearm related crimes and is ranked as the country with the third highest annual rate of firearm deaths after Columbia and Venezuela respectively (Abrahams, Jewkes & Mathews, 2010:586). In a study conducted in 2000 by Norman, Matzopoulos, Groenewald and Bradshaw (2007:696) on the magnitude and characteristics of the injury burden in South Africa, results showed that 46% (27 563) of the estimated 59 935 injury related deaths in South Africa were attributed to homicide, which was the leading cause of death in males. Furthermore, homicide rates were the highest in the male 15-29 year age group (184 per 100 000), which was nine times the global rate. In the case of females, homicide rates peaked in the 30-44 year old age group (31,7 per 100 000), which was seven times the global rate. Norman, Matzopoulos, Groenewald and Bradshaw (2007:697), also state that more than half of all homicides (54%) in South Africa can be linked to firearms.

With regard to young offenders, Maree (in Bezuidenhout, 2013:56) states that homicide is the leading cause of death among South African males between the ages of 15 and 21 years and that youths are both frequent victims and perpetrators of homicide. According to Maree (in Bezuidenhout, 2013:56), firearm violence is the most common between the ages of 15 and 24 years, although it decreases between the ages of 21 and 24 years. Many factors contribute to homicide rates amongst youths, including the availability and ease of access to firearms, the illegal drug market, the climate of violence in South Africa, poverty and unemployment (Maree in Bezuidenhout, 2013:56). Statistics obtained from *Gun Free South Africa* based on 2009 figures, indicated that approximately 18 people are murdered per day, while between 18 and 72 people survive gun violence each day. However data from South Africa's National Injury Mortality Surveillance System (NIMSS)

indicates that there has been a significant decrease in firearm related deaths in the major cities in the last few years (Gun Free South Africa). Firearm related deaths in Cape Town decreased from 49% in 2002 to 33% in 2007, in Durban it decreased from 60% in 2001 to 44% in 2007, in Johannesburg it decreased from 69% in 2001 to 48% in 2007, while in Pretoria it decreased from 60% in 2001 to 44% in 2007 (Gun Free South Africa).

Youths residing in communities where firearms are easily accessible are thus at higher risk of procuring firearms and also using it to commit or further the commission of crime. One can also argue that the possession of a firearm increases the risk for violent offences as youths would be more likely to get involved in acts of violence in order to defend themselves or their turf. Maree (in Bezuidenhout, 2013:56), supports this by stating that the availability of firearms together with factors such as poverty and substance abuse, are key contributing factors to youth violence and to firearms being used to commit crime, resolve disputes, protect oneself against aggressors and in gang warfare.

PREVALENCE OF YOUTH GANGS IN THE FREE STATE PROVINCE

The Free State has been identified as the province with the highest occurrence of criminal youth gangs involved in African witchcraft, Satanism and the occult (SAPS, 2014). The South African Police Service (SAPS) outlines occult related crimes as follows: "Occult-related crime means any human conduct that constitutes any legally recognized crime, the modus operandi of which relates to or emanates primarily from any belief or seeming belief in the occult, witchcraft, satanism, mysticism, magic, esotericism and the like. Included in the scope of occult-related crime are ritual muti / medicine murders, witch purging, witchcraft-related violence and sect-related practices that pose a threat to the safety and security of the Republic of South Africa and/or its inhabitants" (SAPS, 2004).

These gangs are widespread across the province, however certain areas are more affected than others. The most affected areas are the Bloemfontein, Botshabelo, Boithuso and Mangaung sectors, with an estimated 5000 active gang members (SAPS, 2014). Incidents of injuries that are sustained due to gang violence are common, with victims frequently reporting to the Botshabelo Clinic and Pelonomi Hospital in Bloemfontein. The Bethlehem and Bohlokong sector has also reported increased numbers and incidents of gang-related criminal activities, which is defined by the Prevention of Organized Crime Act, 1998 Section 1 (1) (Act 121 of 1998) as: "An act committed by an individual who wilfully aids and abets any criminal activity for the benefit of, at the direction of, or in association with any criminal gang; or threatens to commit, bring about or perform any act of violence or any criminal activity by a criminal gang or with the assistance of a criminal gang; or threatens any specific person or persons in general, with retaliation in any manner or by any means whatsoever, in response to any act or alleged act of violence, shall be guilty of an offence."

Other areas in the Free State, such as Welkom, Winburg, Brandfort, and Bultfontein, are also experiencing an unprecedented growth in gang-related crimes, however the number of active gang members are unclear due to a vast lack of research, as well as unreported incidents by victims and gang members, due to a fear of revenge and further victimisation and retaliation by the gangs (Fouche, 2012). Exact statistics pertaining to youth gangs are also clouded by the evasive nature of these youths who avoid detainment and identification. Due to the lack of information available to law enforcement agencies, detained gang members are often not connected to gang activities.

The most prevalent youth gangs are the Triple 6, Born To Kill, the International Junior Portuguese, and the Natural Born Killers. However, the Natural Born Killers are exceptionally clouded in concealment and secrecy, and virtually no information about them is available (SAPS, 2014). This again highlights the dire need for investigation into the nature and extent of the gang situation.

Furthermore, smaller and less notorious groupings of youths have sprouted out of these larger overhead groups. These small gangs, with estimated member numbers ranging roughly between 5 and 17, include gangs such as the Tekkies Rubbish, Stout van Sekes, and Dog of Ponds (all based in Bothaville), the London Mafia Boys and Hit The Game (both based in Wesselsbron), as well as the International Street Kids (based in Bultfontein). These gangs are not yet seen as problematic, and are mostly apprehended for crimes including shoplifting, intimidation, assault and street robberies (SAPS, 2014).

OVERVIEW OF THE MOST NOTORIOUS YOUTH GANGS ACTIVE IN THE FREE STATE PROVINCE

The following section provides a brief outline of selected youth gangs in the province. These gangs were selected based on notoriety and available information. It is however not possible to discuss all of the active gangs, due to a lack of research and credible information.

The Triple 6 Gang (666)

The 666 gang, which started emerging in South Africa during the late 1990's, is extremely notorious and shrouded in the clandestine and enigmatic. Within the Free State, they reign over the other gangs, and are seen as the religious governing body that all other occult-related gangs, such as the BTK and IJP, are accountable to. Each smaller gang that fall under the 666s has its own rules, regulations, motives and rituals; however all of them have a connection to the occult and African witchcraft (SAPS, 2014).

As the name suggests, the 666s are linked to Satanism and the occult. They have been observed in the sacrificial slaughtering of black cats, the blood of which is believed to be consumed during gang rituals and ceremonies. However, what differentiates them from practising conventional Satanism as is known worldwide, is that their beliefs, rituals and structures are linked to African witchcraft in a unique way. An example of their incorporation of African witchcraft and beliefs is their use of muti, usually containing animal or human body parts. Information gathered suggests that this muti is used before and during the commission of crimes, as they believe it makes them invisible and invincible, thus less likely to get apprehended by law agencies (SAPS, 2014).

There are various gang symbols and insignia that identify the members of the gang. Firstly, all gang members have either a tattoo or cigarette burns consisting of three dots next to each other, usually on top of both fists or on the inner lower forearm, which represents the number '666'. Each dot has a meaning, with the first dot signifying life, the second signifying blood, and the third representing prison. Members are also identified by tattoos with the number 666 which can be placed on any part of the body. Some members also have tattoos of inverted crosses, phrases such as 'Grace of Satan' and symbols related to Satanism and the occult (SAPS, 2014).

The structure of the gang is complex and intriguing. The leader is known as the King, which is the highest rank within the gang. Each area has its own King and each King can have one or more Queens, who are selected high-ranking female members of the gang. The King and Queen are believed to possess the ability of astral projection, enabling them to access and manipulate the dreams and spirits of their members. The 666 branding is seen as an access point of these invocations and is referred to as a 'barcode'. Under the King and Queen are an array of female members known as princesses, who are chosen based on their beauty and popularity. To join the gang, the princesses also have to go through initiation and prove their worth. They are required to either kill their parents, shoplift specific items as requested by the King and Queen (normally items which can be used to lure new recruits such as smart phones or expensive clothing), or recruit a specific number of new members by any means necessary. After the initiation and being accepted into the gang, the main duty of

the princesses is to attract new members, usually by seduction and sexual manipulation. New members are also recruited by force and by manipulative tactics, such as instilling fear and superstitious beliefs into the minds of youths in the community (Liza Rossouw, 2011, personal communication, 20 September).

For a prospective member to join the gang, there are certain initiation rituals he/she is required to complete. The prospective member is expected to provide a blood sacrifice to the leaders of the gang. This requires them to murder a person that is selected by the leaders, in some cases the parents of the prospective member. The initiate is then expected to drink the blood of their victim, and remove the genitals after the murder has been committed. The genitals are then mixed with muti and buried in a cemetery with the initiate present. It is believed that this muti will grant the new member the power of invisibility and invincibility. After this ritual has been completed and the leaders are satisfied with the initiate, he/she will then receive the 666 tattoo or cigarette burns that identifies him/her as a member of the gang (SAPS, 2014).

The 666s are involved in a multitude of crimes, are violent in nature and are known to frequent the use of knives and firearms. Their criminal activities are mostly profitable, including illegal dealings in DVDs and other stolen merchandise, the theft and sale of electronic equipment, armed robbery, kidnapping, burglary and organ trafficking. As previously stated, the 666s are considered as the governing body to the substituent gangs, and commission them to commit various crimes on their behalf. These crimes include the harvesting of body parts for muti and ritual purposes (Liza Rossouw, 2011, personal communication, 20 September).

The Born To Kill Gang (BTK)

The BTK gang is one of the most prolific gangs that fall under the 666s and exhibit strong ties to the occult. They also provide income to the 666s by assisting in the acquisition and trading of human body parts for muti, and various other organised criminal ventures, such as car theft and burglary. The gang's female members are referred to as the Girls Never Respect, or shortly as the GNR7s. The gang is notorious for violent and aggressive behaviour and are frequently involved in attacks on rival gangs, either commissioned or based on revenge (Liza Rossouw, 2011, personal communication, 20 September). Since 2012, the Secure Care centre in Bloemfontein has been faced with constant conflicts between the BTKs and the IJPs, as these two gangs are in strong opposition for dominance. Violence often erupts when new detainees are brought to the centre, due to the competition between the gangs to gain new recruits (Coetzee & Phillips, 2012:24).

The BTK gang members have various identifiable markings. Male members are marked with the letters 'BTK,' tattooed on the right upper arm. In some cases, possibly to avoid detection, the letters 'BTK' are replaced with a tattoo of the numbers 2.20.11. This refers to the numbers of the letters 'B', 'T', and 'K' in the alphabet. Female members will be branded with various gang insignia around the genital area. Members also identify each other by making use of a number 7 hand signal, which is represented by holding up the thumb and forefinger and may also be branded with a tattoo of this signal (Liza Rossouw, 2011, personal communication, 20 September).

New members are commonly recruited by force and branded with gang insignia and tattoos against their will. Children who are unwilling to join the gang are subjected to intimidation, victimisation and physical assault. Incidents of BTK members waiting outside of schools for learners to go home and then forcefully branding the learners with BTK insignia, have been reported. Once branded, these youths are marked as enemies by rival gangs and as a result, are involuntarily forced into the gang for their own survival and protection (SAPS, 2014).

The new recruits are required to go through an initiation ritual, where they are marked with three dots, which express the BTKs allegiance towards the 666s. Each area has its own leader, who is seen as an all-powerful, godlike entity that possesses the ability to speak to the dead and control demons. The leader is worshipped by the members of his gang. The gang leader will cut himself and force the initiates to drink his blood. It is supposed that this then binds the leader to the spirit of the initiates. The new recruits are then told that they are expected to kill their parents, or be sacrificed themselves (SAPS, 2014).

There are numerous crimes that the BTK are involved in, including assault, theft, street robberies, murder, rape, burglaries, arson and malicious damage to property. Various weapons have been confiscated from apprehended BTK members, which include machetes, garden forks, a variety of knives, and spades (SAPS, 2014).

The International Junior Portuguese Gang (IJP)

IJP members are notorious for violent and aggressive acts, which is expressed in their mantra, 'blood in, blood out'. They can be identified by a tattoo of the letters 'IJP' which is overlapped by three dots. This again signifies the gang's allegiance to the 666s. According to the gang's law, this tattoo must be placed on the right side of the chest or right upper arm. If these letters are tattooed anywhere else on an individual's body, the person is regarded as a 'fake' gang member and will be violently punished and assaulted by 'real' gang members. Female members receive a dot tattooed on their foreheads, which indicates that any member of the gang can freely have sexual intercourse with her. In instances where a member has a tattoo on his legs, it indicated that he committed a murder (SAPS, 2014; Liza Rossouw, 2011, personal communication, 20 September).

Apart from the tattoos, IJP members can also be identified by the wearing of a white hat with the letters 'IJP' branded on the top and a combination of the following phrases written on the sides: *Proto na Proto*, which means the person is a smooth talker; *Man in Train*, which implies that the individual's primary focus is money; *Brut en Vleis*, which refers to murder; and *Mark and Do*, which means 'just do it'. If an IJP member observes any non-gang member wearing a similar hat, it is expected of the member to assault or murder the individual, and reclaim the hat (SAPS, 2014).

As with the other gangs, new members are also recruited by force, or attracted by the allure of being a member of a notorious gang with promises of luxury items and branded clothing. As mentioned before, the IJPs and the BTKs are rivals and numerous incidents of violence have been reported in youth detention centres, where the gangs violently contest for the recruitment of new detainees (Coetzee & Phillips, 2012:24).

To become part of the gang, the commission of a murder is required. The new recruit is then initiated through a ritual that includes being tattooed with gang insignia. During the ritual, they may not show any pain, and are expected to eat cotton. The reason for the eating of cotton is unclear (SAPS, 2014).

The structure of the IJP gang is similar to that of their rivals, the BTKs. The leader of the gang is called the King, and all members of the gang are expected to worship him, or

The weapon of choice for the member of this gang is an 'okapi' knife. The knife is marked with three stars, and they refer to the blade point as 'mark and do'. As stated above, this means that they should 'just do it', and should show no fear or hesitation when physically attacking an individual. Crimes that IJP members have been apprehended for include various syndicates, assault, theft, intimidation, robbery, murder and rape (SAPS, 2014).

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Gang sub-culture is a multi-faceted and far-reaching social issue which calls for swift investigation and intervention. What makes intervention even more complex is that gang sub-cultures are not a static issue, but rather ever evolving phenomena that adapt to developments in social structure and socio-economic problems within communities. Societal factors such as the availability of drugs and weapons, urban growth and poverty will undoubtedly have an impact on youth gangs and their means of operation.

Due to the vast lack of research on youth gangs in the Free State, especially with the distinctive element of witchcraft and the occult that these gangs are involved in, there is no simple and straightforward solution to the problem. A social issue as serious as this calls for a multi-disciplinary approach. Intervention efforts will require inputs from a wide variety of stakeholders, including various government departments, the South African Police Service, affected municipalities, gambling and liquor authorities, faith-based organisations and non-governmental organisations (Liza Rossouw, 2011, personal communication, 20 September).

Primary and pro-active prevention should be the focus of any effort to curb the number of youths that may potentially become gang members. Communities and parents can play a vital role in deterring youths from joining gangs. Parents should be educated and aware of gangs in their area, as they can take pro-active steps to protect their children from becoming involved. The following guidelines will assist parents to identify behaviour associated with gang involvement (Matz & Lowe, 2014):

- Sudden withdrawal or anti-social behaviours;
- Secretive behaviour, such as staying out late without reason;
- Deterioration in school performance;
- Sudden changes in attitude;
- Disrespectful behaviour towards authority figures;
- Decreased interest in regular activities; and
- Changes in dress style.

If any of these factors are identified by a parent, it is recommended that they immediately seek assistance (Matz & Lowe, 2014).

The development of education and training programs are also key factors in addressing the issue. It is suggested that a panel of expert role players from various sectors should develop specialised programs aimed at learners, parents and communities, with the aim to raise awareness and to educate learners about the dangers and consequences of joining a gang. If communities and role players such as the SAPS are aware of gang insignia and signs of involvement, they can actively participate in intervention. Training of police officers is also of importance so that they can investigate and identify crimes that are gang-related, instead of labelling the incident as a general crime.

Various other stakeholders can also assist in the addressing of the issue. Social welfare organisations could assist and provide counselling to victims of gang intimidation. These organisations can also look into providing alternative shelter to vulnerable or displaced youths. Religious organisation can also aid victims, whilst at the same time assisting in moral regeneration programs and extra-mural activities in communities plagued by delinquent youths.

As recently as September and October 2015, the authors, through various sources of media, became aware that gang groupings and gang-related incidents have increased in numerous areas of the Free State. Learners who attend schools in affected areas live in fear and are frequently subjected to terrorisation whilst at school. Therefore, a major concern is education of youths being compromised, as schools are frequently forced to send learners

home for their own safety, since incidents of gang members forcefully entering schools often involve violence and intimidation. Communities at large are also suffering due to increased gang-related criminal activity, as well as increases in drug and alcohol abuse. However, these incidents usually happen discreetly, and it seems that most people in the area do not even realise the extent and dangers that these gangs pose to communities and especially the youth in it.

It is therefore of great importance to the authors that a formal qualitative study be conducted in the Free State, so as to collect empirical data on the gang crisis in the area. In the envisioned follow-up study, further concerns will be addressed, which include interviews conducted with members of the South African Police Service in the Free State province, affected community members and individuals providing therapeutic intervention to current and ex-gang members. Other focus areas will include an in-depth discussion of the particular risk factors affecting the Free State youth, the racial and cultural profiles of youth gang members, the relationship dynamics between these youths and their communities and the role which traditional healers play in aiding youths in obtaining muti for the commission of witchcraft and occult crimes.

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